

# Hemingway's Reminiscence of Nature: An Eco-critical Study of "Fathers and Sons"

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**Abstract**—"Fathers and Sons" is the final tale in Ernest Hemingway's *Winner Take Nothing* and last published Nick Adams Story. This article employs ecocriticism to explore the ecological consciousness in the short story. It introduces the definition of ecocriticism and briefly describes the natural world in Hemingway's biography, then focuses on the exploration of Hemingway's reminiscence of the lost natural beauty in "Fathers and Sons". The study holds that Hemingway artistically associated Nick Adams' reminiscence of his beloved father with the loss of ecological beauty in the Michigan State. Through the portrayal of Nick's memories, Hemingway exposed human being's ruin of nature and showed his sympathy for the destroyed ecology. The story actually reflects the Hemingway's yearning towards the lost beauty of nature.

**Index Terms**—Hemingway, "Fathers and Sons", ecocriticism, reminiscence

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ernest Hemingway, a famous American writer and Nobel Prize winner, is also universally recognized as one of the world-famous writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today "His presence in the world of celebrity — a rugged macho figure called Papa with a signature with beard" (Donaldson, 2000, p.1) still leaves a great impression in the hearts of his readers and literature researchers. Hemingway is not only noted for his novels and novelettes, but also productive in the writing of short stories. Throughout his writing career, Hemingway published a great many short stories, which are generally collected into four volumes, namely, *In Our Time*, *Men Without Women*, *Winner Take Nothing* and *The Fifth Column and First Forty-Nine Stories*. In recent years, Hemingway's short stories, like his novels and novelettes, have also become a focus of academic study and they have been interpreted by literary critics from many perspectives, such as the artistic features, the code hero image, the themes of nihilism and alienation, etc. This article employs ecocriticism to explore the ecological consciousness in Hemingway's short story "Fathers and Sons" in order to present an important perspective of Hemingway studies and further arouse the readers' ecological awareness.

## II. ECOCRITICISM AND HEMINGWAY'S NATURAL WORLD

The term ecocriticism was devised in 1978 by William Rueckert in his pioneering essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". It is a methodological approach to literary and cultural criticism that takes nature and environment as its primary focus. The main point of this literary criticism is to probe into the deep relationship between man and nature. According to the eco-critics, "we are one animal among many in this shared world, living in interwoven interspecies communities" (Feder, 2014, p.5). The eco-critics re-read literary works from an eco-centric point of view, with a particular emphasis on the representation of the natural world. They also "extend the range of literary-critical practice by placing a new emphasis on relevant 'factual' writing, especially reflective topographical material such as essays, travels writing, memoirs and regional literature" (Barry, 2002, p.264). As the theorist Greg Garrard pointed out, "Ecocriticism is unique amongst the contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology. Eco-critics may not be qualified to contribute to debates about problems in ecology, but they must nonetheless transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own ecological literacy as far as possible". (Garrard, 2004, p.5). Cultural criticism as it is, ecocriticism is different from any other criticism because it has more literary perspectives than the mere gender, religion, social class and has the combination of many subjects such as ecology, biology, psychology, anthropology, cultural studies, aesthetics, ethnics, historiography, etc. In fact, ecocriticism has become an important literary criticism, from which many famous writers and their literary works have been re-interpreted. Ernest Hemingway is one of the typical cases among them.

Hemingway was a great writer with deep affection towards nature, as Robert E. Fleming indicated "few authors in history have been so closely identified with the natural world as Ernest Hemingway" (Fleming, 1999, p.1). Hemingway's love towards nature was first cultivated by his father Dr. Clarence Edmonds Hemingway, a highly-respected physician who held a strong interest in hunting and fishing. He was also a tender and soft-hearted boy as his mother Grace, a talented singer and music teacher, once wrote, "crying bitterly over the death of a fly he had tried to revive on sugar and water" (qtd.in Baker, 1987, pp.7-8). When Hemingway grew up, he experienced the two world wars and understood the sufferance and misery the war meant to people. In his time, everything, including the physical environment was in a state of chaos and disorder. He had been many places such as the Michigan state which

had been ruined by the cutting of forests, the ancient Africa messed by the hunters and Italy that had been fouled by the Fascists. All these experiences made the writer pursue for all his life the unpolluted natural beauty and rethink about the close relationship between man and nature.

Hemingway's ecological consciousness also owed to his traveling experiences. As a keen traveler, Hemingway spent much time in his life traveling and the experiences in turn had some direct impact on his writing career. He had traveled to a great many places both at home and abroad, including the prairie of Illinois, the forests of Michigan, Canada, France, Italy, Cuba, Switzerland, China, Spain, Africa, etc. Because of the experiences he was often dubbed a world citizen. What's more, the adventures presented the writer a more vivid outlook about nature. Eastern Africa, especially the places in and around Kenya, is not only famous for their beautiful natural beauty, which gave Hemingway spiritual comfort, but also well known as the home town of many wild animals that brought some of the writer's imaginations into reality. Tuna fishing in Spain, trout fishing and skiing in Switzerland, and hiking in Germany all took much of Hemingway's time and gave him lots of pleasure. Besides, Hemingway had been living in Cuba for a large part of his life. His accommodation in Havana was cozy and close to nature. In this old country Hemingway also enjoyed the happiness of fishing.

Due to his experiences in the places above, Hemingway found a sense of returning to nature and harmony with the physical environment. These experiences also offered him abundant materials on his writing. Based on his personal traveling adventure in Spain, Hemingway obtained the materials of *Death in the Afternoon*, a book about Spanish bullfighting, in which his famous Iceberg Principle was put forward. The bullfight in Spain expanded his knowledge about human being's relationship with animals. As Edward Stanton put it, "From his love and understanding of the fighting bull, I believe Hemingway himself began to sympathize with the animal's feeling for a querencia where he felt secure and confident" (Stanton, 2005, p.129). Because of his hunting experiences in Eastern Africa, he was able to write the novels *Green Hills of Africa* and *True at First Sight*, the short stories "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber", "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and "An African Story". Meanwhile, Hemingway's life in Cuba, his close relationship with the sea and the fishes provided him with rich materials on the famous work *The Old Man and the Sea*. Thus scholars claimed that "in all his work, from the early stories to *The Dangerous Summer*, there arises a kind of opposition between those who live in harmony with nature and those who do not" (Josephs, 2000, p.222). And "Fathers and Sons" is one of the important short stories reflecting Hemingway's awareness of ecological protection.

### III. REMINISCENCE OF THE LOST NATURAL BEAUTY IN "FATHERS AND SONS"

"Fathers and Sons" is the final tale in *Winner Take Nothing* and Hemingway's last published Nick Adams Story. Nick, in the short story, is driving along a highway in an American main street with his young son beside him asleep on the car seat when he suddenly recalls some of the hunting and other anecdotes during his youthhood with his beloved father, who committed suicide a long time ago. On first sight, "Fathers and Sons" seems to be nothing more than a description of Nick's entering the psychic journey and emotional terrain he has previously avoided, yet it is through Nick's reminiscence of his father in the story that Hemingway attempted to show his concern about the loss of natural beauty in the State of Michigan. And Hemingway's deep ecological consciousness can be explored through an eco-critical reading of this short story.

The arrangement of the highway in the beginning paragraph of the story can be understood as one of the clues showing Hemingway's concern about the loss of nature and ecology in the Michigan State. "Fathers and Sons" begins in an uncharacteristic setting for Hemingway, such as the Main Street, Middle America, and Sunday afternoon. But that setting is characteristically oppressive. Driving through this small town, Nick is constantly stopped by the traffic lights that flash on and off although there is less traffic on Sunday. The shade trees lining Main Street are "only too heavy, they shut out the sun and dampen the houses" (Hemingway, 1987, p.369). Nick has been driving for a long time. The place he has arrived in is different from that of the country of his own childhood. This small southern town through which he passes makes him feel like a stranger. As far as Nick is concerned, the place is so cloying that he tries to put it behind as soon as possible. No wonder he chooses to ignore the detour sign, taking for granted that "cars had obviously gone through" (Hemingway, 1987, p. 369). There is a feeling of relief as Nick moves out "past the last house and onto the highway that rose and fell straight away ahead" (Hemingway, 1987, p.369); and beyond the town, "all of this country was good to drive through and to see" (Hemingway, 1987, p.369). Nevertheless, "neither Nick Adams nor his creator is a Kerouac, a Steinbeck, a Least Heat Moon, an American poet of the open road. Highway, in Hemingway, is a wound on the land, destroyer of a way of life" (Beegel, 1998, p.77), just as Ashton Nichols put it, "These authors, poets, and early scientists, consistently claim that human beings are contiguous with the natural world rather than distinct from it. They collapse the distinction between nature and culture at the same time that they point out similarities between and among all living things. (Nichols, 2011, p.22). Quite a short time before writing "Fathers and Sons", Hemingway mourned the destruction by the highway of Nick Adams' Michigan State in a passage that was later deleted from *Death in the Afternoon*:

Michigan I loved very much when I lived in it, and when I was away from it, but as I grew up each time I returned to it it was changed. It was a country of forests, lakes and streams and small farms with hills and pastures, always with a background of woods. There was no place in upper Michigan where you could look across open land and not see the woods and you were never far away from open water. They cut down forests, the streams lost their water, the lakes had

their levels lowered and raised by the taking or not taking of water to float sewerage from Chicago down the drainage canal; they built concrete motor roads across all the country and around the lakes; the motorists caught all the fish out of the streams and, as the boys went to Flint or Detroit to work and prices made it impossible to make a living, they abandoned the farms. (qtd.in Beegel, 1998,p.77)

This same sense of destruction and loss is also illustrated in "Fathers and Sons", in which Nick perceives the highway as a kind of laceration, with "banks of red dirt sliced cleanly away" and "second-growth forest on both sides" (Hemingway, 1987, p.369), reminding us of the old-growth timbers that have all been slashed to make way for automobiles. We know that the American industrial revolution reached its climax at the beginning of the twentieth century. A lot of automobiles came up and went to the villages, mountains and forests. Countryside and wild fields were turned into a web of highway and as a result the whole natural system was severely damaged. In the year 1947, Hemingway wrote to William Faulkner talking about his life away from America. Part of the letter read, "My country gone. Trees cut down. Nothing left but gas station, sub-divisions where we hunted snipe on the prairie, etc" (Hemingway, 1981, p.624). In this sense it is not difficult to detect that Nick's driving across the American highway is also "tingled with mourning for the land and for an expulsion from the Eden" (Beegel,1998, p.77), which serves as a reflection of the serious destruction of natural beauty by the modern civilization.

However, it is ironically the highway that carries Nick back into the "good country", where farms have not yet been abandoned. And "driving easily" now, Nick starts to think about hunting in his mind. As his hunting is first taught by his father, Nick begins to recall the appearance of his beloved father. The land flushes the sentimental memories and they come pouring at Nick, who is, like the startled quail hunter, unprepared to take them. He feels sentimental when his mind is haunted by the grief memories of his father's appearance, character and death. To release himself from such a spiritual torture, Nick tries to think about some other things in the mind. Consequently he flinches away from the painful images of his father in the casket and his own shame at planning to exploit those images in his writing and begins to recall his first sexual intercourse in the hemlock woods behind the Indian camp. Nonetheless, the therapy he hopes for is still not available and there is still no comfort in such a psychological change, as Nick's memories here in the following description include the destruction and exploitation of both the hemlock woods and the Indian ways of life:

Then the main road went off to the left, skirting the woods and climbing the hill, while you went into the woods on the wide clay and shale road, cool under the trees, and broadened for them to skid out the hemlock bark the Indians cut. The hemlock was piled in long rows of stacks, roofed over with more bark, like houses, and the peeled logs lay huge and yellow where the trees had been felled. They left the logs in the woods to rot; they did not even clear away or burn the tops. It was only the bark they wanted for the tannery at Boyne City; hauling it across the lake on the ice in winter, and each year there was less forest and more open, hot, shadeless, weed-grown slashing. (Hemingway, 1987, p.372)

Together with Nick's driving in the car, his anecdote in the hemlock woods behind the Indian camp is another lengthy and meaningful description. In actual distance, "the journey is not great, but metaphorically it is. Rather than the modern world of automobiles and paved highways and traffic lights, we are carried to pre-civilized world, where people move on bare feet through forest and swamp" (Flora, 1989, p.49). Here the author wrote the remembrance for the sake of his abstract meanings. To be more precise, the detailed description in the paragraph above actually shows the picture of how the Indian forests were plundered and destroyed. After the American Civil War, due to the development of new forms of transport, felling, mill technology and the rise of corporate monopolies, the lumber and forest product industries entered a period of vigorous expansion. Nick Adams' Michigan State, because of its special geographical setting, became one of the regions that had been ravaged. The following quotation will provide us with a more specific sight of the devastation:

Michigan and other lake states – with their dense, rich and various tree cover, their low and gently rolling terrain, and their readily available water transport via lakes and rivers – became the site of frenzied exploitation, peaking at 10,000 million board feet per annum in 1890, falling off gradually to a still staggering 4,000 million board feet in 1910. This timbering rampage was conducted entirely without today's concern for "sustainable" yields, and the impact on the Michigan of Nick Adams' boyhood was devastating. By 1907, more than 10.7 million acres of the state had been clear cut. (qtd.in Beegel, 1998, p.84)

The vivid description and statistics show us that the ravaging forestry practices had at that time exerted a devastating impact on the Indian people, whose traditional lifestyle included hunting, fishing and basic agriculture. To this innocent group of people, the cutting of forests was itself to a certain extent an exploitation of their subsistence. The Indians used the materials of fruit and nuts, bark, sap, dyes, medicine and arrow wood in quite a sustainable way, and they cut only dead or dying trees for firewood. They seldom cut down green or living trees, "from the idea that it puts them to pain, and some of their medicine men profess to have heard the wailing of the trees under the axe" (qtd. in Beegel, 1998,p.85-86). But the illegal exploiter's destruction of the forest changed the Indians' way of life. Hence they had to sell their labor force and property at a very low price to the timber barons who took away their living sustenance. Hemingway, who used to live in a northern Michigan summer house, sometimes played with the Indians. The images of the Indians, their primitive yet innocent ways of life and their unity with nature all left a deep impression in the heart of Hemingway. Consequently the writer was sympathetic towards the people and realized that his passion for wilderness, hunting, and fishing was becoming a continuing source of grief and mourning. In "The Last Good Country", another

Hemingway's Nick Adams' story, Nick's sister's words "Damn slashings" and "I hate them. And the damn weeds are like flowers in the tree cemetery if nobody took care of it" (Hemingway, 1987, p.516) can be another demonstration of this point. Through the depiction of Nick's memories in the quotations above, we can see that Hemingway also showed his nostalgia for the old-growth forests and the sorrow towards the loss of the beauty of nature and ecology in the State.

As the story goes on, it has become nearly dark after Nick's recalling of the hunting experience and first sexual intercourse. The story tells us that, to Nick, the end of the day always belongs to him alone and he will never think of his father in such a moment. However, the fact is that Hemingway didn't put an end to Nick's reminiscence of his father in the story. Instead, the description was again switched to Nick's recalling of his father. This time the reminiscence is related directly to the setting of nature:

His father came back to him in the fall of the year, or in the early spring when there had been jacksnipe on the prairie, or when he saw shocks of corn, or when he saw a lake, or if he ever saw a horse and buggy, or he saw, or heard, wild geese, or in a duck blind; remembering the time an eagle dropped through the whirling snow to strike a canvas-covered decoy, rising, his wings beating, the talons caught in the canvas. His father was with him, suddenly, in deserted orchards and in new-plowed fields, in thickets, on small hills, or when going through dead grass, whenever splitting wood or hauling water, by grist mills, cider mills and dams and always with open fires. (Hemingway, 1987, pp. 374-375)

Nick's love towards his father has been changed into a strong passion for the great nature; meanwhile, his reminiscence of his father has been turned into the sentiment towards the disappearance of the natural beauty in the American countryside. Nick is conscious that his father will never come back to life; neither can the destroyed nature be recovered completely. This reminiscence of lost natural beauty comes from the Michigan timbering frenzy that damaged the regenerative capacity of the land. What's more, "clearcut forests in Michigan were not replanted until the 1920s, and that first crop was not ready for harvest as saw timber until five years after Hemingway's 1961 suicide" (qtd.in Beegel, 1998, p. 85). According to ecologists, once the environment of a place is severely destroyed, it will never recover to its original state. They hold that "although what remains may evolve into a viable ecosystem of another sort – like a suburban neighborhood supporting whitetail deer – that ecosystem will bear no resemblance to what was lost" (Beegel, 1998, p.103). As a result, there is no wonder Nick's son prefers the family should live and be buried in France or at an American ranch in the future.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Environmental crises today are obviously the result of human being's disconnection from the natural world, which are caused by our overconfidence in conquering nature. In this serious situation, the raising of ecological conscience is a foundational way to solve the problem. The arousal of respecting and protecting nature lies not only in nature writings, but also in many modern narrative fictions, as Leo Marx pointed out in his pioneering book *The Machine in the Garden*, "There can be little doubt that it affects the nation's taste in serious literature, reinforcing the legitimate respect enjoyed by much writers as Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and Robert Frost" (Marx, 1979, p.6). From the knowledge of Ernest Hemingway's biography and the careful eco-critical study on his works, we come to the recognition that Hemingway is a great writer who, as an avid lover of fishing, hunting, and bullfighting, has a deep love and appreciation towards nature; and the relationship between man and nature is one of the themes of his literary works. "Fathers and Sons" is an elegiac short story in which Hemingway, who was himself taught fishing and hunting by his father like Nick Adams in the story, artistically associated Nick Adams' reminiscence of his beloved father with the loss of ecological beauty in the Michigan State. Skillfully moving from motion to emotion and through the portrayal of Nick's memories, Hemingway exposed human being's ruin of nature and showed his sympathy for the destroyed ecology. The story actually reflects the Hemingway's yearning toward the lost beauty of nature and civilization. The analysis of "Fathers and Sons" from an eco-critical point of view offers an important perspective for the study of Hemingway's short stories. And the readers' environmental consciousness will definitely be further aroused after they re-examine the short story with such an eco-critical approach.

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